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Odyssey of a Defector

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—A new speed record for political defection and redefection has perhaps been established by Jozsef Szall, Hungary's senior diplomat, who fled Budapest last autumn, sought asylum in the United States, and has now returned to Europe proclaiming himself a Hungarian patriot and a good "socialist."

Szall had been his country's Ambassador to Italy for years after serving in China, Indonesia and at UNESCO. Last summer he was recalled to Budapest and more or less put in cold storage, being given only a titular post as adviser to the Foreign Minister without any real job or an office.

In August a Hungarian-language publication of Free Europe, Inc., published a harsh attack on Szall alleging that he had been corrupted by ambition and the Roman life and that he had been involved in international business transactions. Szall subsequently complained, after he fled from Hungary, that these calumnies were circulated among Budapest party officials and closed any doors still remaining open to him.

Free Europe, Inc., acknowledged that such articles were published Aug. 28, 1970, and Dec. 11 (two weeks after the Italian Government announced that Szall had asked for and been granted political asylum).

A high official conceded that it had been an "unwise editorial decision" to print them and indicated efforts were being made to determine whether Free Europe's Hungarian exile publication had allowed itself to be used as the vehicle for possibly forged reports.

Szall himself fled Budapest in October, driving his wife and small son through the Czechoslovak city of Bratislava and across the frontier to Austria, benefiting from the fact that he still had diplomatic papers and license plates. From Vienna he went to Rome and promptly asked the Foreign Ministry for help.

The Hungarian authorities tried hard to persuade Szall to return. He agreed to meet special emissaries from Budapest in St. Peter's Cathedral, Vatican City, and was only saved from being kidnapped there by secret police agents through effective intervention by Italian security guards.

After this attempt to use force, even in the neutral haven of the Vatican, Szall felt the lives of his family were unsafe in Italy.

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larly large Communist apparatus. He sought sanctuary in the United States.

At first Washington was reluctant to grant this but finally agreed to accept the Szalls last January. The Ambassador was the highest-ranking Hungarian defector to the West since the 1956 revolution and the highest-ranking diplomatic defector from the Communist bloc in several years.

However, after four months in the U.S.A., Szall had second thoughts. The American Government made no attempt to interfere when he changed his mind and decided to return to Europe last month. Initially he sought new sanctuary in Switzerland but, when this was refused, he went back to Italy where he now presumably feels more safe than he did last winter.

The story of Jozsef Szall is a tragic cold war hangover. He represents the kind of human flotsam and jetsam that still, from time to time, flees one ideology for another and then discovers to its distress that it feels even less comfortable in new havens than in unhappy homes left behind.

At fifty, Szall has lived through World War II, German occupation, Russian occupation, Stalinism, anti-Stalinism and Budapest's nervous tightrope walk ever since, teetering between liberal and illiberal experimentation. A little man with relatively modest ideas and no overpowering fervor, he has sipped at every political flower between Peking and Washington without, apparently, finding a taste that suited him.

He hasn't yet made the major decision to go all the way—back home to Budapest. One must assume that Italy, which formally offered him asylum little more than six months ago, remains ready to honor that pledge today. Whether he will want to stay is another thing.

Although of higher rank, Jozsef Szall, in his doubts and tergiversations, bears resemblance to that considerable exile community of lost souls including peacenik American soldiers, Soviet dissidents and Chinese doubters who seek to shake off abroad the troubles that hem them in at home. They find to their sorrow that John Donne was wrong: Neither the flesh nor the devil can be escaped by run-